

## Chemophobia

*Don MacKinnon is president and chief operating officer of Ciba-Geigy. He spoke earlier this year at Pace University in White Plains, N.Y. Here, verbatim, is part of what he had to say.*

What does chemophobia mean? Literally, fear of chemicals. The term generally is being used now to describe the almost spontaneous, negative response that occurs when people hear the words chemicals and chemical company. In a sense, there is almost a chemical reaction taking place when chemicals are mentioned—a flash of light accompanied by lots of smoke.

[Among the effects] that chemophobia is having, and the one which probably will be with the industry the longest and carry the highest price tag, is the significant increase in regulations and laws.

Will the trend of increased regulations and costs continue? Some people feel that it might change—that there might be a lessening of regulation because of the change in Administrations in Washington. That is a probability, but it is not all that easy to stop what already is happening. For one thing, many of the regulations that will have a major impact on the chemical industry are still in the pipeline. They've been approved in concept by Congress and are being written or revised by regulatory agencies but aren't ready to be implemented or enforced. I have been told by knowledgeable people within the government that just to wind down the pipeline will take around three years. Thus, we can expect more, not less, regulation for the immediate future at least.

Second, the vast majority of staff members in the regulatory agencies are civil servants. They don't change because the Administration does. It will take some time before new guidelines and direction can filter down from the newly appointed agency directors to affect those who implement the regulations. And, of course, there is still a strong public sentiment against the chemical industry and against business in general. Until a greater feeling of trust can be built up, until there is a demonstrable change in faith in business, it seems unlikely that there will be much public pressure on Congress to pass legislation that reduces some of the controls on business.

On the other hand, there are some signs of change. There is a proposal now to have the federal agencies attempt to weigh the cost of implementing regulations against the benefits to be derived from them. That is an improvement over the existing situation where little or no consideration is given to cost.

There is also legislation proposed that would extend the life of the patent given the length of time it takes to move new products through the regulatory system. It would provide for up to seven additional years of patent protection, but never more than 17 years from the time the regulatory agency approves the product for marketing.

And in addition, there is an ever-widening appreciation for the fact that government spending has to be cut. The growing regulatory bodies are bound to be a tempting target for the knife. However, the public still wants a clean, safe environment. If business can convince the public that it too wants a better environment and will work toward fulfilling its new social agenda, it may find an ally in the battle against overregulation. And that alliance can happen only if some of the chemophobia that exists today is dispelled.

Chemophobia has had a significant impact. In the news media, with one-sided, negative stories. In the public's poor perception of the industry. In more burdensome regulation. In higher costs and reduced productivity. In shorter patent life and lower returns on investments. In less research being done and, ultimately, in fewer new drugs and other chemical entities being introduced.

The focus has been too long on the negative side of chemicals. It's time for the pendulum to swing back so that the benefits of chemicals as well as the risks are discussed, so that a more balanced story can be told and believed. If that happens, more light and less heat will be generated in the chemical reaction. □